

Socrates' Crito

Why does Socrates Accept Execution?
Or: The beginning of Political
Philosophy.

Set the scene

- The setting is Socrates' cell, approx. a month after the trial.
- Word has come that the Athenian state galley is returning from Delos.
- Socrates' good friend Crito has arrived early in the morning at Socrates' cell to warn him of this and convince him once again to escape with his and other friends' help to avoid execution.

Crito

- In Crito's first attempt to persuade Socrates to escape he laments the affect on his own reputation if Socrates is allowed to die (probably in recognition of Socrates' unwillingness to escape for selfish reasons).
- Reading 1 @ 44b

Crito

- What do we learn from Socrates' response?
 - His view of claims about what the “Majority” of people think.
 - We also learn what Socrates thinks the greatest good and the greatest evil that can befall a man are. What are they?
 - The greatest good that can befall a man is to be truly wise. The greatest evil that can befall a man is to be a fool. (this is not a matter of intelligence!)
 - This accords with what Socrates' believes (as attested in other dialogues) about the relationship between moral goodness and wisdom, moral depravity and ignorance.

Crito

- So if the majority have no say in what is to be done and not done, what is right and what is wrong, then who does?
- Reading 2 @ 47.

Crito

- Since we should not value the opinion of the majority in such weighty matters it seems that we must find some criteria to distinguish those views and opinions we should value from those we shouldn't.
- Simply put, Socrates proposes we should value good opinions and not bad ones.
- Further, good opinions are those of wise men and bad ones are those of fools.

Crito

- In response, one might say: “But by ignoring the majority and following what we consider the ‘wise opinion’ we may be put to death, for the majority obviously have the power to do that.”
- Socrates’ response involves all that talk about athletes and trainers. What are these consequences and why are they important?

Crito

- Socrates draws a parallel between the “corrupted body” of an athlete who doesn’t listen to his trainer, and the corruption of the part of us that “unjust action harms and just action benefits.” (47e)
- We may think of Socrates referring here to our “souls.”
- But it is important to remember that this is a translation of the Greek word **ψυχή (psychē)** meaning “life, spirit or consciousness,” not soul in the modern Christian sense.

Crito

- Socrates states that life is not worth living with either a corrupt body or a corrupt soul (psychē).
- **“the most important thing is not life, but the good life.” “And the good life, the beautiful life, and the just life are the same.”(48b)**
Therefore...

Crito

- “the only valid consideration is whether we should be acting rightly in giving money and gratitude to those who will lead me out of here, and ourselves helping with the escape, or whether in truth we shall do wrong in doing all this. If it appears that we shall be acting unjustly then we have no need at all to take into account whether we shall have to die if we say here and keep quiet, or suffer in another way, rather than do wrong.”
- What does this mean????

Crito

- It means Socrates would rather die than do wrong, and holds that any other wise man should feel the same.
- Now the only question that remains is whether in escaping Socrates would be doing wrong, would be doing something unjust.

Crito

- In case it would be wrong for Socrates to escape, whom exactly would Socrates be wronging? On whose behalf must the wise man speak up if Socrates' escape is in fact unjust? On whom would his escape inflict an injustice?
- Answer: Socrates would be wronging the people of the city, and the laws that they have instituted, that condemned him to death. In other words, Socrates would be wronging the state.

Crito

- Next comes a discussion of the relationship between the citizen and state. This discussion may be viewed as the beginning of political philosophy much as the Euthyphro may be viewed as the beginning of moral philosophy.
- Political philosophy is a branch of moral philosophy that deals not with the relations between individuals, but the relation between individuals and the state, and also, eventually, relations between states.
- These are among the most complex and difficult of moral questions. And Socrates presciently foreshadows our modern discussions of the subject (from divine command to Hobbes, Locke and the social contract).

Crito

- Reading 3 @ 49e.

Crito

- According to this text, why does Socrates owe the state and the laws his death once they have demanded it?
- The more general question is: why does a citizen owe obedience to her government?

Crito

- We can discern two distinct strains of thought in Socrates' answer, though he doesn't distinguish between them.
 - 1. The state is your superior who begat, raised, educated and protected you, like your parents.
 - 2. You have entered into an agreement (as between equals) with the state to obey. This is the beginning of social contract theory.

Crito

- As for #1, the parent account of the right of governments to obedience it is interesting, but also deeply problematic.
- In what ways might a government to whom you owe allegiance *not* be like your parents?

Crito

- First, this might mean that we owe obedience only to the government of the state in which we grew up.
- Second, equating all citizens to children is problematic, especially to modern liberal viewpoints (not liberal as in liberal/conservative, but liberal in terms of focusing on human liberties and rights) that want to grant each citizen the status of autonomous being. Can we hold children fully legally accountable for their moral actions?

Crito

- Account #2, the agreement account (social contract), is by far the more interesting.
- The first thing to notice is that it doesn't have any of the problems we drew out for the parent account.

Crito

- It specifically assigns citizens the status of an autonomous individual who is fully capable of entering into agreements and who can be held fully morally accountable for violations.
- It also deals with the problem of a mobile citizenry. I can easily enter into an agreement with a state that had no hand in my upbringing if I happen to move into one.

crito

- Social contract theory holds that the only way a citizen becomes obligated to follow the laws of a state is for her to have entered into an agreement with that state which promises her obedience in return for the protection and social coordination a state provides. Furthermore, that state has a right to demand obedience as a result of this agreement.
- There is one fundamental weakness in this theory. Why is it that an explicit social contract might not account for all the cases of obligation to follow the law we seem to need in our modern society especially?

crito

- A contract requires **consent!**
- Did you ever explicitly consent to be bound by the laws of the US? If you are a naturalized citizen you did. However, if you are a citizen by birth, you didn't. So how are you bound by these laws?

crito

- Socrates addresses this problem in the Crito. How does he attempt to get around this?

crito

- Instead of some form of **explicit** consent, like a signed contract, or the sworn oath of a naturalized citizen, he proposes the idea of a form of **implicit** consent.
- He claims that by staying in Athens, and not leaving, though this was in no way hindered by the laws, he **implicitly** signaled that the laws of Athens were “congenial” to him. He approved of them, and therefore bound himself to them.

crito

- This response, though prescient (many forms of implicit consent are still debated as the basis for social obligation to legal obedience) is itself highly problematic.
- By definition, consent is something must be given freely. There can be no coercion.
- How might this be a problem for the implicit consent through residence account?

crito

- Imagine yourself faced with the following situation. You have decided not to consent to the laws of your birth nation. Yet the only way to express that is to leave, abandoning your home, language, culture, friends, means of livelihood, etc...
- Essentially the choice is to become a stranger in a strange land or obey. Does this sound like a free choice? Or does the threat of losing everything you have ever known possibly seem coercive?

crito

- Another problem is where a particular government gets the right in the first place to claim a monopoly on governance in a particular geographical area, an area you must abandon in order not to be bound to obedience? The location of specific national borders are not a matter of moral right, but an accident of history. How can such historical accidents entirely divorced from our poor citizen's own autonomous life bind him to life-long obedience or exile?

crito

- There are many answers to the question of how citizens are bound to legal obedience in the modern discourse of political philosophy. But for the moment we have reached the point where we must leave the question for another time.
- Socrates has once again managed, several millennia ago, to pose the questions we are still wrestling with today.

The Death of Socrates (Jacques Louis David 1787)

